

# Too Precious for You

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*“Too Precious for You” est une critique du film, Precious, qui est basé sur le roman Push by Sapphire (2009), réalisé par Lee Daniels. J’explore les impacts affectifs de ce film qui aborde les problèmes liés au racisme, au genre, à la phobie de l’obésité, aux luttes de classes et à la violence aux États-Unis. J’affirme que le “côté ignoble” de ce film n’est pas propre à réjouir un auditoire populaire qui n’est pas prêt à les reconnaître ni à s’engager. Toutefois, plusieurs scènes du film présentent un défi qui justifie une intervention politique. L’impact de la violence et de la pauvreté chez les Noires peut déclencher une réaction de dégoût, produite et maintenue dans un monde qui est loin d’être parfait. Il reste que les femmes abusées (physiquement et/ou sexuellement) négocient leurs expériences selon leurs termes. L’infamie est mêlée à un pouvoir imaginatif. Plutôt que de tomber dans le narratif du désespoir et de la victimisation, je cherche à explorer la signification du mouvement de va-et-vient entre la marginalisation et la prise de pouvoir.*

I watched the film *Precious* (2009) after much of the mainstream media buzz had somewhat dwindled. In the midst of my viewing, I kept expecting, and with some pessimism, a formulaic turn that would replace the messy and complex issues of racism, class, gender, and violence with *not so* messy representations of adaptation and resolve. I dreaded the kinds of responses that are familiarly embedded in a strategy of compliance, neutrality, and the most unchallenged category of all—“positive” images for the consumption of a growing “politically correct” audience. My apprehensions stem from observing competing and oscillating ideologies that frequently seem to lose the politically affective and unexpected impacts of film. These oscillations have simple stories to tell and audiences find neatly packaged “answers” to complex issues and ideas. Witness the recent praise of James Cameron’s film, *Avatar* (2009).

The most difficult (and interesting) films, in my opinion, are the ones that leave us somewhat stunned at our own

inability to “make sense” of other worlds or to resolve once and for all the contradictions that do not align with those terms of engagement that are currently used to *tolerate* and assimilate “difference.” What happens when a film attempts to put an end to consensus politics, thus, abandoning how bodies and lives *should be* represented and instead explores the curious potential of bodies that live life as both habit and shock? Habit moves the body in what only appears to be expected, until the body can no longer take the pressure of it all sending shock waves to the capitalist nervous system. Habit and shock are affective states of neo liberalism, which cannot be contained, controlled, or predicted. Kathleen Stewart, a cultural anthropologist writing about modernity and America, observes, “[Ordinary affects] can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation” (2).

The recent shift in presidential regimes in the United States is a striking backdrop to the release and distribution of *Precious: Based on the Novel, Push by Sapphire* (2009) directed by Lee Daniels. This film, along with the novel, is a vivid reminder that a country such as the United States, which purports to enjoy the highest standards of living, wealth, and “progress” is fundamentally unable (in terms of consumption and waste) to control the excess that it produces. Abject bodies, therefore, emerge from such systemic discriminatory frenzies. Rather than neatly make sense of it all, Lee Daniels tracks cinematically what the current American government of Barak Obama cannot hide: the ugly face of America and its nightmare of racism, poverty, and violence. Daniels undoes all diplomacy around these issues by making poverty and violence palpable.

*Precious*, which is set in Harlem, tells the story of an adolescent African-American woman named Precious (played by Gabourey Sidibe), who is temporarily trapped in extreme circumstances of abuse. Early in the film, we learn that she has been raped by her father several times. The violence, however, does not end there. Her mother,

Mary (played by Mo'Nique) is not just an (abused) woman in denial about violence and incest: she also physically, sexually, and emotionally abuses Precious as a twisted and brutal consequence of maternal jealousy. The Freudian flip (it is not the child who is jealous of the father's love for the mother) is disturbing not because it happens in the family but because *it is* the family that sets up the fertile ground for such distorted machinations. In casual conversations with colleagues and friends who have seen the film, Mary's grotesque and abject portrayal is almost instinctively perceived as racist by these viewers. In fact, in a couple of instances when I've asked whether people are going to see *Precious*, the response has been one of needing to ban it altogether because it conveys such a harsh image of black women and poverty. The politics of representation demands that black women remain matriarchal figures (hooks), rescuing the familial order of things as America continues to churn out the (im)possibility of functional family life.

The women in *Precious* do not fulfill this matriarchal role, thereby stripping the romance of Afro-centric idealizations of woman as martyred guardians of an "African Nation" (hooks). When both parents are essentially (familiar) monsters, the audience must get a grip on not only race and class but also of violence against women in the protected zone of the mommy-daddy-me-triangle. Precious has two children by her father (one who has Down's Syndrome and is named Mongo—short for Mongoloid). The other child, Abdul, is born around the same time that Precious learns to read and write. Motherhood and literacy intersect as catalysts that radically shift her uninhabitable world. Precious breaks from the violent entanglements of family with a subtle force rarely seen on the screen. Unapologetically, the film confronts and exposes wounds of cruelty perpetrated by the heteronormative family, poverty, racism, and sexism.

Armond White, writing for the New York Press about the film, declares with absolute certainty that the film is racist, a "sociological horror" and a "post-hip-hop freak show." While some of his critiques are valid, namely his scepticism of Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey who as executive producers, White claims, take advantage of the film's social context to further dichotomies between two worlds: one that Precious is stuck in, and the other that she can, with hard work, join. However, White seems to miss the timely importance of Barack Obama's "sociological horror show" (White) and of White's own unquestioned classifications of *horror*, which includes the very presence of Gabourey Sidibe. More specifically, he argues that "Sidibe herself is presented as an animal-like stereotype—she's so obese her face seems bloated into a permanent pout."

White's honest account of repulsion, rather than offering a critique of stereotypes, reveals instead, a desire to be rid of corporeal excess and if possible, to erase from view, all women *like* Precious. Precious' body is large and she moves without asking permission despite the looming violence

that surrounds her. Walking through public space, she admits that there is "always something in my way."

What stands in her way cannot immediately be overcome. At times we witness the utter frustration that surfaces as sudden eruptions charge her body unexpectedly. In one of these scenes, the class is writing the letters of the alphabet on the board and when Precious writes the letter "f" someone in the class blurts out that "f" is for "fat." Precious doesn't stop to think and hits the woman who makes this comment. This is not dissimilar to the opening scenes of the film when Precious slaps a classmate for not paying attention to the teacher, who she has a crush on. Before hitting her classmate, she is daydreaming of the teacher as he tries to gain some control of the class. Later still, she pushes a young girl away from her as she storms through her apartment stairwell with her baby Abdul to get away from her mother. This rage, as ineffectual as it may appear, is important in developing Precious' character because it shatters the image of an "ideal victim" who is at the very least afraid and passive. Things are not quite how they should be in the landscape of poverty and violence and our expectations of Precious as an ideal survivor overcoming misery would miss the opportunity to explore the imperfect and cruel worlds that often result from violence.

Yet, reviewers and critics seem mostly disturbed at having to see life's sudden impacts, especially from a black woman who does not quite satisfy a formula of polite resistance. To put it another way, agency is always unpredictable in how it plays out and the manifestations can come suddenly in a fit of rage, or through writing, dreaming, laughing, loving, making the decision to abandon relationships, and in the moments of discovering the creative potential of invented kinships and connections. Precious' agency at the end of the film is of particular importance when she tells her mother in a meeting with the social worker, Mrs. Weiss (played by Mariah Carey) that "she ain't gonna see her (mother) no more." This liberating moment of truth comes after she tells Mrs. Weiss that she is reading at a Grade 7 level, an accomplishment that gives her the strength to finally break all ties with her mother and to unite with her children.

She is neither "saved" by the prospect of a normative family, nor does she take refuge in a discourse of abuse. Her decision to leave her mother and the social worker, Mrs. Weiss, invokes anxiety, in those final moments of abuse. Mary demands that Mrs. Weiss get Precious back, but to no avail. Precious' departure situates her and her children in new constellations of possibility.

Out in the city, amongst strangers, Precious can *only* create a new life, and the ambiguity as to where she is going or where she might end up is irrelevant to the necessary risks she must take (and has already taken). This ambiguity can be tied to what Kathleen Stewart describes as "free fall," or as bodies being out of place, where "there are people whose American dreaming is literally a dreaming cut off

from any actual potential. But that doesn't stop it—far from it. This situation isn't exactly functional but it's not necessarily 'bad' either. Though it can be." (98).

These are the kinds of risks that a liberal audience do not want to witness. These are risks that are formed outside of dominant discourses of recovery and "positive thinking." Precious takes control away from the people who would like to sculpt her into an idealized victim of abuse.

As difficult as it may be for some liberal feminists to acknowledge, Precious is a young woman, who, like most women in North America, has been influenced by

her own voice and materiality. After leaving her public high school with a referral from the school principal, to go for a smaller, alternative class that can better prepare and accommodate her needs, she meets Ms. Rain (played by Paula Patton), her new teacher and support. No longer answering to an authority figure, Precious experiences a very different dynamic of relating. In a small class, with other young women trying to also prepare for their GEDT (General Educational Development Tests), Precious at first is shy and unable to speak. When Ms. Rain asks each student to describe what they are good at, Precious

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the sexist, racist, and fat phobic demands of a popular culture. In other words, Precious is a feminist in her own struggle while also being a product of a sexist culture. She glamorizes the shiny surfaces of celebrity images as a way to garner superficial praise—an immediate antidote to her suffering. Her fantasy sequences appear when she is most vulnerable.

It is no surprise that Precious holds on to the most normative idealizations of beauty as she drifts into a world of fantasy where she is an adored and admired celebrity. This is a stark contrast to her reality of perpetual silencing and invisibility. In one fantasy sequence, she dances with a light-skinned man, who also appears in another fantasy when she looks outside her window and sees him waiting for her on a motorcycle. Precious does not lose her sensuality: while her fantasies may allude to a physical self-hatred (she visualizes a blond, thin woman when she looks in the mirror), the prominent image that is reflected back at the audience when she stares at the mirror is also an image of *our* (the audience's) making. These dominant images of "femaleness" are always already caught up in oppressive cultural notions of what it means to be a beautiful woman (white, blond, thin etc.). Precious wants this and uses this image to escape her physical reality; however, the film always returns to Precious.

This return therefore moves beyond the self-hatred of a poor, fat, abused, black woman. Rather, it reflects back a powerful and disconcerting message about the dysfunctional adoration of dominant images of beauty that *we* are all complicit in creating and perpetuating. The internalization of such an image confounds what is really at work here, which is Precious' self-discovery of her actual presence and embodiment.

In contrast to this moment and no longer based in fantasy, Precious appreciates for the first time in the film

declares that she does nothing well, only to correct this statement when Ms. Rain insists that she think of something. Finally, Precious declares that she cooks well and that "I never really talked in class before." Ms. Rain asks her how this makes her feel, to which Precious responds, "Here—it makes me feel here."

This is perhaps the most radical statement of the film—the initial moment at which Precious begins a journey of self-transformation. To be *really* present and to speak the truth in the face of pain is what initiates a process of healing for Precious. It becomes clear that the blonde, thin woman that she would rather see in the mirror as her reflection does not damage her self-worth, nor does it over-determine a dominant image of beauty. Instead, Precious foregrounds her agency in shaping how she uses those images.

Issues of race and class have often become the subjects of a "rags to riches" narrative in mainstream Hollywood cinema, inevitably leaving intact the problematic outcome of unquestioned assimilation (i.e., *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 2006). In other instances, a selected category of marginalization may be privileged over another. Racial discrimination, for example, may override misogyny and homophobia, with black men naming racism but also *hating* the women and/or queers that surround them. Almost any Spike Lee film to date would fit this description if we bothered to look carefully. The film *Precious* purposely breaks from uncritical identity politics and features not only the potential strength and fortitude of black female characters but also their ordinary ways of living in the world.

When Precious begins to gain control of her life we learn that her father had died of AIDS while staying at a halfway house. Shortly after that, Precious discovers that she too has contracted the HIV virus. Like the other violent mo-

ments in *Precious*' life, a fantasy sequence ensues where she is in a photo shoot and once again at the center of attention. Rather than interpreting this fleeting fantasy as a banal reference to celebrity culture, it is important to pay attention to *how* *Precious* moves in this fantasy sequence. In all her corporeal excess she confidently gazes back at the camera, thus rejecting a status of victimhood.

While this may seem like a peculiar interruption from the harsh reality of contracting HIV through incestuous rape, *Precious* does the unthinkable: she transports her body and moves it outside of the lens of pain, at least temporarily. Her mother's revelation comes with an assertion that she cannot have the virus because "they never did it up the ass." This statement—a common heterosexist misunderstanding about HIV—comes after *Precious* has spent some time with Ms. Rain and her lesbian partner who open their doors to *Precious* when she is seeking refuge with her newborn son.

This eye-opening experience for *Precious*—her exposure to lesbian intimacy and hospitality—unravels the misconceptions that *Precious* also had about same sex desire and her thoughts (as narration) *talk back* to her mother when she declares, "Mama says homos are bad people but mama, homos aren't the ones who raped me." When *Precious*' mother tries to suggest that HIV is about "doing it up the ass" and that her "normal" sexuality somehow protects her from socially abject diseases, we not only witness the distortion but also the perverse loyalty to an imagined (hetero)normativity. Lee Daniels uses these opportunities to locate the violence in the familiar.

Has the popularity of the film revealed a new sensibility and understanding of violence against women of colour? The intricate and complicated levels of the film move beyond leaving an audience hopeful of hope itself. It twists, turns, and grinds any predictability that might correspond to the neat intersections of race, gender, class, and violence. In other words, the intersections found in *Precious* get messy and we are not only told a story but inserted into the folds of the mess that we would rather not see.

Yet, these cruel revelations of life are curiously optimistic. Daniels interprets Sapphire's novel without apathy, thus exposing his own political breakthroughs. He is at the same time dis-obedient in his portrayal of violence, racism, and class divisions in America; he does not censor or refuse to engage *the nightmare*. Lynn Hirschberg, in a *New York Times* article, "The Audacity of *Precious*," quotes Lee Daniel's on fat phobia and racism before the making of the film:

'Precious' is so not Obama... 'Precious' is so not P.C. What I learned from doing the film is that even though I am black, I'm prejudiced. I'm prejudiced against people who are darker than me. When I was young, I went to a church where the lighter-skinned you were, the closer you sat to the altar. Anybody that's heavy like *Precious* I thought they were dirty

and not very smart. Making this movie changed my heart. I'll never look at a fat girl walking down the street the same way again.

An ethics of alterity, a reaching towards difference in all its apparent "imperfections" is at work in making a film like *Precious* because Daniels challenges his own experience of blackness and how it may have contributed to racist and fat phobic assumptions. Thus, if recognizing the "self" through difference is the point of reflexive departure, it also creates a willingness to reach towards that which is unknown. To reach towards difference in this way violates the terms of political consensus (which is fundamentally based on diplomacy) because it uncovers first and foremost one's position in relation *to* difference. Therefore, whether the film is racist or not, sexist or not, classist or not, seems too simple a distraction from the exploratory potential of finally relating to *this* difference.

The violence is both explicit in the abuse that we cannot deny, while at the same time, implicit in the everyday disciplinary mechanisms that sustain it. These include ineffectual social services, deprived public school systems, unacknowledged fat phobia, and heterosexism. Perhaps it is also the reason why the closing credits acknowledge that the film is, "For *Precious* girls everywhere."

*Thank you to Jane Doe for her continued struggle and courage.*

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